Nearly 600 students participated this year in the summer science program hosted by Eastern Idaho Technical College and partially funded by Idaho National Laboratory.

Science summer camps spark student interest, excitement

By Kortny Rolston, *INL Communications & Governmental Affairs*

Instead of swimming or riding a bike, Liliana Romero spent part of her summer at Eastern Idaho Technical College crafting a glitter lava lamp, growing alum crystals and studying fluorescence.

And the Idaho Falls fourth-grader couldn't have been happier.

"I get to make things that glow in the dark," she said. "It's awesome."

Romero is one of the hundreds of eastern Idaho students who participated in EITC's summer science program, which is funded by Idaho National Laboratory, the Leland D. Beckman Foundation, the EITC Foundation's board of directors and others. This year's enrollment hit 589 — a new record for the program.

"The camps have been extremely popular with both kids and parents," said Ken Erickson, EITC's workforce development coordinator. "We have kids who attend two classes a session."

The Idaho Falls technical college launched the summer program four years ago to help bolster students' interest in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). EITC hosted a similar program in the late 1980s and early 1990s but disbanded it because of a lack of funding.

Erickson credits INL for jump-starting the STEM program.

"INL gave us the seed money to help get this program going again," he said. "Without the lab's investment, it wouldn't be as successful. The sponsorships and grants we get help keep the camps affordable and allow us to reach kids who otherwise wouldn't be able to go."

The summer camps run for two weeks in June and July and are open to students in grades 1 to 5. Students are divided into age groups and can participate in up to two classes per week.

EITC recruits local elementary school instructors to teach the classes, which are designed to be hands-on and differ from year to year. This year's classes included a CSI-style course in which first- and second-graders investigated the disappearance of a stuffed bear, dinosaurs and fossils; glow-in-the-dark chemistry; and Lego robotics.

Laurie Lewis taught glow-in-the-dark chemistry, one of the summer's most popular courses. Her students — including Romero — learned about fluorescence and luminescence through a variety of laboratory activities and research on the Internet.

"I love that these students are learning so much by collaborating with one another and by doing experiments," said Lewis, who teaches second grade in Idaho Falls. "It's the best part of teaching science."

Erickson said the goal of the camps is to get young students excited about STEM and spark their interest in pursuing careers in science,

technology, engineering or math.

"We want to teach these subjects in a fun and exciting way so they see that (STEM subjects) aren't boring," he said.

Melinda Hamilton, INL's director of education programs, said the lab funds projects and programs like EITC's summer camps for that very reason.

"Students love hands-on work and science is hands on," she said. "Reaching these kids early and keeping them interested in STEM subjects is one of our goals at INL. They are the future engineers and scientists who will be working at Idaho National Laboratory."

Romero, who aspires to be a scientist, was just happy to take the class.

"I get to learn new things every day," she said.

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